MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMISSION OF FINE ARTS

HELD FRIDAY, JANUARY 24, 1919.

The fourth meeting of the Commission of Fine Arts during the fiscal year 1919 was held in its office at 1729 New York Avenue, N. W., Washington, D. C. on Friday, January 24, 1919.

The following members were present:

Mr. Moore, the Chairman;

Mr. Adams;

Mr. Kendall;

Mr. Greenleaf;

also Colonel C. S. Ridley, U. S. A., Secretary and Executive Officer. The meeting was called to order at 9:30 a. m., and proceeded at once to the business before it.

1. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES: The minutes of the preceding meeting held in Washington November 22, 1918, and of committee meetings held in New York City on January 8, 1919, were presented by the secretary and approved.

2. ROCK CREEK PARK REPORT: Colonel Ridley, as Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds, laid before the Commission for review and criticism a report with accompanying exhibits of maps and plans made by Olmsted Brothers, landscape architects, on Rock Creek Park. This report was in the nature of a preliminary report and had originally been prepared by Olmsted Brothers for the Commissioners of the District of Columbia; but with the transfer of the jurisdiction and control of that park from the original Board of Control to the Chief of Engineers, U. S. A., as part of the park system of the District of Columbia, it had been turned over by the municipality to the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. Mr. Greenleaf was appointed a committee with power to submit to the Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds any criticism or changes that might be considered desirable.

3. ZONING LAW FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA: The Chairman informed the members

that the Commissioners of the District of Columbia had taken up anew the problem of providing a satisfactory zoning law for the District of Columbia which had been interrupted by the war and that hearings on this subject were to be given on January 25th at 2 o'clock in the office of the Engineer Commissioner. He said he would attend to represent the Commission, acting as a previously appointed committee.

4. "TITANIC" MEMORIAL: Section 7 of the District of Columbia appropriation act approved March 3, 1917, authorizes and directs the Chief of Engineers, United States Army, to grant permission to the Women's "Titanic" Memorial Association to erect on public grounds of the United States in the city of Washington, D. C., other than those of the Capitol, the Library of Congress, Potomac Park, and the White House, "a memorial appropriate as a lasting tribute to the heroes who sacrificed their lives ... in the tragic catastrophe of the sinking of the steamship Titanic." The same section also provides that the site chosen and the design of the memorial shall be approved by the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress and the Commission of Fine Arts.

Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney had completed the memorial for the Women's "Titanic" Memorial Association, and Mr. Henry Bacon, architect, in collaboration had prepared a plan showing pedestal and treatment of the site. The site tentatively selected is at the intersection of E Street, northwest, with the west side of Twenty-seventh street, northwest, at the foot of New Hampshire Avenue. Mrs. John Hays Hammond, as Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Association, had submitted a photograph of the memorial figure and Mr. Bacon's plans showing pedestal and treatment of site to the Officer in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds, as the representative of the Chief of Engineers, in order that he might secure the approval of the Commission of Fine Arts and Joint Committee on the Library of the design and site as is required by law.

Colonel Ridley placed the matter before the Commission for its action. The memorial composition and site as shown by the exhibits submitted were approved and such action certified to the Officer in Charge.

5. MACDONOUGH MEMORIAL: By act approved August 1, 1914, Congress provided for a memorial in commemoration of the victory of Commodore Thomas Macdonough on Lake Champlain in eighteen hundred and fourteen in the following words:

> "For the erection of memorials at or near Plattsburgh, New York, in commemoration of the victory of Commodore Thomas Macdonough on Lake Champlain, in September eighteen hundred and fourteen, in accordance with plans to be approved by the Secretary of War and commissions to be appointed by the States of Vermont and New York, respectively, to be expended by the Secretary of War, $15,000 toward the memorial of the State of Vermont and $125,000 toward the memorial of the State of New York; in all $140,000: PROVIDED That no part of the said appropriation shall be paid out of the Treasury until after the State of New York shall have appropriated a sum not less than $125,000 for its said memorial and celebration."

By direction of Colonel S. W. Roessler, in charge of the First New York District Engineer Office, Mr. John Russell Pope, architect, laid before the Commission the plans and designs for the Macdonough memorial at Plattsburgh, New York. They were approved and such action certified to Colonel Roessler.

6. INSCRIPTION FOR KEY MEMORIAL: Colonel Ridley, as the personal representative of the Secretary of War in the erection of the Francis Scott Key Memorial at Fort McHenry Park, Baltimore, Maryland, laid before the Commission a blueprint showing to scale (P. B. & G. 430.25) a proposed inscription for the front of the pedestal of the Francis Scott Key Memorial. This inscription was considered unsatisfactory in that it crowded the space too much, and it was felt that it would be much finer for the proportions of inscription to space if the letters could be made larger; repetition of the word "and" at the beginning of the 5th, 6th, and 9th lines was particularly unfortunate. The following was studied out and recommended for substitute, since it would fill the available space admirably:

TO FRANCIS SCOTT KEY
AUTHOR OF THE
STAR SPANGLED BANNER
AND TO THE
SOLDIERS AND SAILORS
WHO TOOK PART IN THE
BATTLE OF NORTH POINT
AND THE
DEFENCE OF FORT MCHENRY
IN THE WAR OF 1812.

Because of the slender lines of some of the letters shown it was suggested that a trough-shaped cut might be more satisfactory than a V-shaped cut.

The arrangement of adornment for Course A, as submitted on Public Buildings and Grounds blueprint numbered 430.26, was considered satisfactory.

7. COMPLETION OF CAPITOL FRIEZE: The Secretary next read a letter from James L. Slayden, Chairman of the Committee on the Library of the House of Representatives asking the Commission to submit a report and recommendation on S. J. Resolution 125, which he enclosed and which is one of several like tenor that have been introduced in House and Senate. Mr. Slayden stated that the Committee on the Library would like to have the Commission go into this matter with care, and give an expression of opinion as to the wisdom or unwisdom from an artistic point of view of agreeing to some such legislation; also, if the frieze is to be completed, under what conditions should it be undertaken, and how could the procurement of an unworthy design and inferior execution be prevented. It had already been called to the attention of the Commission that a Mr. Whipple had undertaken, under informal authorization, to complete the frieze, and that Mr. Weir, acting as a committee for the Commission, had inspected Mr. Whipple's work and had pronounced it "as senile, cheap and Germanesque in its bad qualities," and that it never ought to be allowed"; he added, "as to using some receipt of the old Masters that will preserve it for all time, God forbid, - there is nothing in the Capitol worse."

Colonel Ridley reminded the Commission that the question of the completion of the frieze had been referred to and reported on by the Commission in December

1915, and the advice then given that it was inadvisable to attempt either alteration or continuation of the frieze as it now stands. Mr. Moore was appointed a committee to draw up a report to Mr. Slayden, based on Mr. Weir's report and the former action of the Commission. (See exhibit A.)

8. WIDENING OF THIRD STREET, AND ITS RELATION TO MEADE MEMORIAL: Colonel Ridley laid before the Commission a sketch (P. B. & G. Case 3 - 447.2) prepared by his office, showing a proposed widening of Third Street immediately south of Pennsylvania Avenue for the accommodation of future street car lines, and also a change in Second Street. Colonel Ridley said that the Commission of Fine Arts, in studying the question of the utilization of the old Canal spaces for their report to the Public Buildings Commission in 1917, had considered it necessary in the future to widen Third Street for that purpose. He pointed out that if this scheme was definitely considered advisable it would affect in an appreciable measure the location of the Meade memorial; and that as the exact site for the memorial was shortly to be finally approved by the Congressional Meade Memorial Commission it was important now to know the opinion of the Commission regarding the widening of the street. The change proposed as shown was approved, namely, with the Meade memorial on the center of the axis of the two groups, and Third and Second Streets widened.

9. MERIDIAN HILL PARK: As a result of recent conferences with the Commission on the desirability of raising the lower level of Meridian Hill Park, Colonel Ridley laid before the members a number of cross sections showing the lower level raised three feet and the cascade so lowered that the lip of the bottom fall was five feet above the level of the lower garden. These studies showed a section through the cascade, (P. B. & G. No: 2 - 17 - 327.128A); a section on the axis of the west and east ascent, (P. B. & G. No: 2 - 17 - 327.128B); sections EE (P. B. & G. No: 2 - 17 - 327.128C); and sections on the axis of the lower garden marked AA and BB, section AA showing the elevation of the lower cross walk, (P. B. & G. No: 2 - 17 - 327.128A and D.). All these were approved.

10. MEMORIAL TREES ALONG MALL AND AROUND LINCOLN MEMORIAL: Colonel Ridley referred

to the proposal recently advanced, which appears to be receiving considerable support, that trees be planted around the Lincoln memorial, along the basin, and the Mall as memorials to heroes of the war. The Commission saw no objection to such a plan provided tablets were kept off the trees and good nursery stock were secured, and that trees be planted in accordance with the approved planting plan for these areas, and according to specifications adopted by the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. The kind of trees to be planted along the lagoon and the Mall had already been decided upon by the Commission, but some discussion arose as to the kind of trees to be used around the Lincoln memorial. Mr. Greenleaf was appointed a committee to talk this over with Mr. Bacon and Colonel Ridley. This conference took place the following day, and American Elms were decided upon.

A letter from Charles Lathrop Pack on such memorial trees dated November 23, 1918, was read.

11. MUNICIPAL HOSPITAL: By appointment Brigadier General Kutz, Engineer Commissioner of the District of Columbia and Snowden Ashford, municipal architect, appeared at 11:30 for consideration of revised plans prepared by the latter for the new municipal hospital on Reservation 13, based on the Commission's disapproval of schemes previously submitted. General Kutz showed four different plans. One which showed a circle terminating Potomac Avenue and Massachusetts Avenue, with the new Administration building placed immediately north of the circle on the north and South axis and facing south, and a building for outpatients placed on the axis of C street immediately on Nineteenth street, with a number of wards parallel but not normal to the future extension of Massachusetts Avenue, was approved. This plan has been numbered 4 among the blueprint exhibits retained in the office files.

During the discussion General Kutz emphatically stated that he was not in favor of a high level bridge across the Anacostia River on the Massachusetts Avenue line, as was recommended by the Commission of Fine Arts in their last communication to him, but that this was a matter which need not be decided at this time since it

does not enter into the situation seriously now.

12. EMPLOYMENT OF TEMPORARY STENOGRAPHER AND TYPEWRITER: The employment of a temporary stenographer and typewriter for a period not exceeding three months in the office of the Secretary was authorized, at a compensation not exceeding $100 per month.

After a short interval for lunch at 1 o'clock, the meeting was continued.

Mr. Greenleaf brought to the attention of the other members the evident necessity of securing a park connection between the Soldiers' Home Grounds and Rock Creek Park as soon as possible. He stated that he had gone over the ground very carefully recently and had found it obvious that a parkway connection on the lines recommended by the Park Commission, namely, on Varnum Street, was impossible without excessive cost of condemnation of many homes that had been built on both sides of that street from Georgia Avenue to the Soldiers' Home, and that a more circuitous route would probably have to be followed. The members followed Mr. Greenleaf's remarks closely, and later in the day acquainted themselves thoroughly with the situation by a personal inspection on the ground. The matter was considered important, and it was proposed to call it to the attention of the District Commissioners.

There being no further business to come before the meeting, the Commission adjourned at 3 p. m., subject to the call of the Chairman.

APPROVED:_____ Colonel, USA.,

Chairman. Secretary & Executive Officer.

February 18, 1919.

Sir:

The Commission of Fine Arts, from whom the House Committee on the Library asked for a report and recommendation as to the resolution (S. J. 125) authorizing the Joint Committee on the Library to provide for the restoration and completion of the historical frieze in the Rotunda of the Capitol, respectfully report and advise as follows:

Historically the Capitol is the most important structure in the United States. It both typifies the beginning and marks the growth of the nation. Its surpassing merit is not its completeness but its progressive development. It is, moreover, an unerring expression of public taste. Thornton's design was selected from among many by Washington and Jefferson. Washington expressly disclaimed any knowledge of architecture, and deliberately stated that he was ready to be governed by "the rules laid down by the professors of the art". What he required in the Capitol were grandeur, simplicity and convenience - the essentials of all good architecture. So, also, Jefferson, who had both studied and practiced architecture, approved the Thornton plan, because it was "simple, noble, beautiful".

The standards set by Washington and Jefferson - grandeur, simplicity, convenience - have been followed in the successive stages of building; and, because these standards have been maintained, the Capitol today, in location and design, is one of the world's finest buildings. When the Capitol was burned in 1814, President Madison insisted that it be rebuilt according to the original plan. In 1850, when the Capitol was enlarged, President Fillmore thought it "desirable not to mar the harmony and beauty of the

present building which as a specimen of architecture is so universally admired"; and when he selected and upheld Thomas U. Walter, the architect of the wings and the dome, he wrote his own name into the history of the Capitol.

Structurally and in architectural appearance the Capitol needs only the extension of the eastern front and the replacing of the cast-iron of the dome with marble to complete the edifice. These are details which can wait until the increase of public taste demands the undertaking.

When one comes to the decorations, the sculpture and the paintings inside the Capitol, one finds occasionally a good work obscured by entire absence of scale in its neighbors. As a rule, lawlessness, incapacity and crudity rule the place. It is apparent that no control has been exercised, no unity has been attempted, and that Jefferson's standards of simplicity, nobility and beauty have been ignored, if even they were known.

In the Rotunda the badness of much of the decoration has been brought out by cleaning and putting in order the fine walls, which task was excellently done, a few years ago, under the direction of the Superintendent of the Capitol. It then became noticeable how un-American, feeble and puerile were the panel reliefs depicting scenes from our history, executed by Franzoni and Capellano. Yet one reflects that, during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, there were no sculptors in America; and that the imported artists named represented the best talent obtainable for work in a new country.

When it comes to the frieze, the case is different. The space under the great cornice which surrounds the Rotunda was planned to receive a marble frieze in bas-relief, showing the progress of Freedom, civil and religious. The idea of the great dome supported on plastered walls and

not on stone was inconceivable by the architect, Mr. Walter; and his sketch (a copy of which accompanies this report) shows the frieze as one of the essential features of the Rotunda, from both structural and decorative points of view.

The decorations of this space by Brumidi and Costaggini were manifestly temporary. It is quite inconceivable that an artist like Brumidi supposed that his imitation sculpture would be permanent. The conception and execution of the "Battle of Lexington" do not rise above the art of the nursery; and certainly do no justice to the artists who decorated the Capitol of the United States in the style of Raphael's Loggia, of the halls of Pompeii and the Baths of Titus. When they attempted to treat American subjects seriously, they depicted animals, birds and plants with nicety and accuracy; but the frieze they did in perfunctory manner, not justifying even payment at the regular rate of $10. a day for services.

For good reasons the frieze has been left uncompleted. First, it would be impossible for a mural decorator of reputation to descend to the level of the Brumidi frescoes; and to make something really good would force a contrast so startling as to make the whole work out of balance. Secondly, the structural requirements call for a marble frieze and the employment of artists of the very highest class both to conceive and to execute what should be as great a work of art as American sculptor ever created.

As for the design which is now being placed upon a portion of the unoccupied space, it lacks virility, it appears cheap, and it is painted in the modern German manner - that is, without simplicity, nobility or beauty. There is nothing in the Capitol worse in composition or in treatment; the work has been a waste of time and effort.

When the completion of the frieze is taken up, the plan should call for marble and for sculpture; the design should be studied with care and the execution should be entrusted only to artists who by their executed work have proved their competence.

Very respectfully,

The Commission of Fine Arts

By Charles Moore

Chairman.

Hon. James L. Slayden,

Chairman, Committee on the Library,

House of Representatives, U. S.